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ABSTRACT

The characteristics, responsibilities, and functions of curriculum professors are examined using a symbolic approach. Education is an area of endeavor representing a high level of symbolic activity, and insofar as curriculum centers on what is or should be taught in the schools and how it should be treated, curriculum workers occupy symbolically strategic ground. Their activities and actions are informed by changing public sentiment and, conversely, the significance of what they say and do is in part determined by public response. Many documents in the field of curriculum are very much period pieces that assumed vitality and meaning due to the emotional climate of the time in which they were written. Educational innovations rise and fall in response to the hope for concrete results, rather than on the basis of their objective merits or demonstration of results. Curriculum professors have a symbolic obligation to keep faith in the cause of popular instruction alive and to champion the ideas of innovation, change, and reform in education. Curriculum issues can be abandoned without intellectual resolution since they respond to the psychological environment, and what is important is whether their treatment furthers emotional ends. The frequently emotive character of curriculum language is symbolically important, since it reduces the need for careful thought and its oversimplification lessens ambiguity. Symbolic discourse is intended to express what people wish to believe, notwithstanding the facts and rational impediments.

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I wish to address the question, "What do curriculum professors do?" The question is not rhetorical. There are good reasons for asking it, and I believe that its investigation can improve understanding of the field.

One might say that curriculum professors do what other professors do: they teach; they research and write; and they consult. The assertion is accurate but superficial, for it does not get at certain characteristics which make curriculum something of an anomaly in the university community.

That curriculum has imprecise boundaries and content is one of these traits. As a field, it is amorphous and extremely permeable. Its distinctive theories, assumptions, principles, problems, modes of inquiry, and products are not easy to isolate. Curriculum professors, moreover, define their responsibilities in significantly different ways: some see the field in terms of content areas, others in terms of general processes which cut across subject-matter lines; some focus on instructional methodology, others on teacher education in general; some view themselves as technicians, others as philosophers, social critics, and reformers.

Not surprisingly, curriculum knowledge, too, tends to be amorphous, and more to the point, it is marked by nondevelopment, evanescence, and redundancy. As a group, curriculum professors do not rally around a common, systematic body of professional lore that has been built up by accretion over the years. The work of one generation may be ignored or forgotten by the next, yet may reappear de novo down the line. The

language of curriculum, still further, departs from scholarly convention. Instead of being linguistically precise, curriculum discourse is often highly emotive and evocative.

Besides these characteristics, it is important to recall that curriculum professors do not bear primary responsibility for the construction of curricula used in schools. Notwithstanding individuals noted as writers of school texts, the curriculum professoriat has not adopted this role as its reason for being, and publishers, curriculum committees, and teachers do not necessarily look to professors for teaching materials.¹ And lastly, the ambivalent status of education professors in general and curriculum professors in particular should be mentioned. In the 1920s, the professoriat began to pull away from traditional university norms and to identify with the schools.² The consequences of this realignment have been at best problematic, for although, on the one hand, it remains in the university, the professoriat is not always considered of the university, and on the other hand, its relations with schoolpeople are not entirely supportive.

These characteristics justify, I believe, the question raised at the beginning. The significance of the curriculum field is indeed, in my opinion, an issue worthy of attention.

Now, one way to deal with the question is to bury it under normative declarations about the importance of education and our intent to do good. We are all familiar with this technique; the history of education is replete with examples of it. But it really only evades the issue: asserting what should be does not say much about what is.

Another way to deal with the question is by means of utilitarian analysis. This would seem to be the most acceptable strategy, for it

accords with our supposed pragmatic temperament. It has been said that American educators think like engineers, that they are practical problem-solvers whose desire to make things work is greater than their desire to understand.³ From this viewpoint, value is defined in instrumental terms. If something "works," solves a problem, or produces the right outcome, it has value because it is materially useful.

To evaluate the curriculum professoriat on the basis of utility, however, is difficult and threatening. It is difficult because of the field's unsettled content, roles, and purposes. It is hard to assess the usefulness of an indeterminate object. It is also difficult because individuals may be esteemed irrespective of what they call themselves. For the same reasons, instrumental analysis is threatening. Phenomena which do not easily fit the requirements of the evaluative scheme are apt to be deprecated. People with a penchant for clarity and order or who are fond of operationally defined outcomes and empirical verification are not likely to ascribe great value to something as loose, fuzzy, and disjointed as curriculum. And in this regard the attempt of professors to meld the different interests of the school and of the university complicates an already unfavorable situation: in the eyes of university colleagues curriculum workers may be too practical while in those of schoolteachers they may be too theoretical.

To probe the matter further, however, I suggest that the utilitarian perspective be laid aside for the moment and that the meaning of curriculum activity be explored symbolically. This mode of inquiry can shed light on features and events which do not make sense in instrumental terms, and in my opinion education is highly susceptible of symbolic interpretations. I do not pose as an expert in symbolism, yet I think

that I can at least indicate some of the advantages of looking symbolically at things educational and curricular.

My interest in the approach was prompted by a commentary on Bowles and Gintis's Schooling in Capitalist America by David Cohen and Bella Rosenberg.⁴ They discuss the limits of functional analysis and the danger of assuming that all functional relationships imply instrumental intent. They point out that the meaning of an event may be in its ability to express a value or belief and can be independent of any functional effects that the event might have. Thus they see compulsory school attendance legislation in the 19th century and the scientific testing movement in the 20th century as significant for the values and beliefs they manifested regardless of whether they attained the practical ends expected of them. This line of argument is amplified in the work of Murray Edelman, who has applied symbolic theory to politics.⁵ He maintains that, besides conveying goods, services, and power, political forms symbolize "what large masses of men need to believe about the state to reassure themselves" and that people's needs, hopes, and anxieties largely determine political meanings.⁶ Hence, while certainly not denying instrumentalism, these authors focus attention in another direction and give prominence to the expressive nature and psychological value of events.

The role of symbols here is of course critical.⁷ Some symbols are primarily referential; they refer to objects and do so in a standard manner that facilitates thinking and communication. Edelman mentions statistical tabulations and cost figures in a contract as examples of referential symbols.⁸ They denote and stand for objects and can be used uniformly by all persons familiar with the terminology. Other

symbols, however, are important because they evoke emotions. These are condensation symbols. Their display conjures up and condenses psychological responses. They unsettle or reassure, depending on who or what invokes them, to whom they are directed, and the context in which they appear. The national flag, the architecture of a bank building, and the words "democracy" and "communism" are condensation symbols. It is understood that symbols can play both roles simultaneously. While rationally referring to a particular class of persons, the term "soldier," for example, may also give rise to an emotional response associated with one's attitude towards the military and warfare. For purposes of this investigation, however, our concern is mainly with the emotional and expressive aspects of symbolization rather than with its relations to the processes of thought.

Certain settings seem to be positively associated with expressive symbolization. Where people see the central involvement of their welfare -- be it in terms of spiritual satisfaction, physical security, economic prosperity, or social status --, they are prone to be alert to symbols. An atmosphere of urgency, crisis, or extreme importance increases the likelihood of emotional response.

In addition, ambivalence, ambiguity, and a sense of remoteness are usually present. Rarely being of one mind when confronting complex issues, people are uneasy about making clear-cut decisions, especially when several desired objectives hang in the balance. Further, people frequently find that weighty matters are often very ambiguous. The old idea of giving citizens all the facts and then letting them make up their own minds still strikes a responsive chord, but in point of fact

few of us are prepared to receive and deal intelligently with all the facts concerning the issues of local community, state, nation, and world. In many areas of importance, we are frankly incompetent to fathom all the relevant ins and outs, and the fine print, so to speak, remains obscure.

Lastly, there is the matter of remoteness, which refers to the frequent inability to see and to judge the consequences of a decision, policy, or program. A political party that will gauge its viability by the number of its standardbearers victorious in the next election has a clear means of assessing outcomes, but in many instances outcomes do not lend themselves to easy apperception. They are remote, and are so for at least two reasons. On the one hand, the link between action and impact may be vague because it is simply, in Edelman's words, "so long and so tangled."⁹ We still argue about the "true" results of many of our national policies and historical actions, not because we are inattentive, but because we have no unimpeachable way of cutting through the indeed long and tangled web of events. On the other hand, an outcome may be conceptually remote in that its formulation does not allow for empirical verification. When will we have met the needs of our national defense? When will we have achieved social welfare? When will we know that equality prevails? When will we be able to announce that the reign of justice has arrived? Goals like these, though sincerely proclaimed and popularly supported, are not as much descriptions of empirical states of affairs as they are normative and formal categories.

Politics and religion have been identified as areas representing high levels of symbolic activity,¹⁰ and I would suggest that education is also worthy of consideration in this regard, for it, too, reveals the

conditions just discussed. Who can deny that education provokes intense concern? The importance of education to the welfare of the individual and of the society is a belief deeply embedded in our mythology, and as a people we have long tended, somewhat simplistically, to prescribe educational remedies for all manner of ills. And one does not have to be a particularly close student of education to detect the ambivalence about its direction; contrarities abound in the programs and purposes of the schools. The limits of relevant knowledge, moreover, amply attest to the extent of the uncertainty in educational affairs: fundamental factors, such as intelligence, are elusive, and the answers to essential questions about teaching and learning remain sketchy. Furthermore, the goals of education eminently qualify as being remote. A good job, good citizenship, personal fulfillment, and success in general are routinely cited as the benefits of education, and all are both temporally and conceptually remote.

Within this perspective, it may be argued that educators play symbolic roles. Their activities and actions are informed by the undulations of public sentiment, on the one hand, and the significance of what they say and do is in part determined by public response on the other. And insofar as curriculum centers on what is or should be taught in schools and how it should be treated, curriculum workers occupy symbolically strategic ground.

In a study still in progress on the so-called disciplines' era, George Mehan contends that the curriculum discourse of the late 1950s and early 1960s did not initiate or direct a movement.¹¹ Arguments and proposals for teaching the structure of organized knowledge had been quietly discussed during the preceding decade. What gave impetus and

significance to the discourse of about 1960 was the public mood, for it was reassuring to many to see that at least some educators, including eminent scientists, were moving to improve our schools and to expedite learning in ways which would enhance national superiority and security. The once popular albeit crude impression that small children might soon become miniature physicists was comforting, not because it was true, but because it was emotionally satisfying.

Reassurance seems to have also figured in the pronouncements of groups like the Educational Policies Commission. In depression and war, EPC documents, representing the views of distinguished leaders in education, affirmed for their many readers that the schools were doing their part to minimize the impact of economic dislocation, to protect democracy, and to attend to the needs of all American youth.¹² On rereading these documents today and examining their format, language, and tone, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that they were aimed more at the heart than at the head. The same may be said for other writings, such as certain curriculum conference reports and society yearbooks.¹³ Some of these documents are very much period pieces which strike later readers as being somewhat vacuous and flatulent. Of course part of this is due to changing curriculum needs, but I also believe that it was the emotional climate of the time in which they were written that gave these works much of their vitality and meaning. As that climate changed, so did their significance.

Consider, moreover, the rise and fall of educational innovations. Rarely do things like team teaching, programmed instruction, and open classrooms -- not to mention object teaching and monitorial instruction -- come and go on the basis of their objective merits. They tend

to be ushered in on waves of enthusiasm which peak and ebb with no necessary reference to instrumental effects. The claims made for them, not exceptionally, far exceed their potential efficacy, and they are hailed by otherwise rational persons as "breakthroughs" of panacean proportions. Concrete results are hoped for, to be sure, but it is the hope that accounts for the welcome, not the demonstration of results.

In his history of American educational thought, Rush Welter evidences the enormous faith that this country has placed in the cause of popular instruction,¹⁴ and as we know, "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Keeping that faith and hope alive is a symbolic obligation (one especially befitting the professoriat, busily seeking new discoveries), and one means of carrying out this responsibility is the ceremonial invocation of reform. Reform is an educational rite. I cannot think of a single generation since the advent of the common school that has failed to champion this notion. The ideas of innovation, change, and reform are unquestioned staples of our professional diet. They are also, I think, a symbolic necessity, for as ideas to be kept in view they serve to nourish the hope that sustains ideals. In this connection, an explanation is afforded for why educators on occasion make use of religious imagery and forms in their discourse.¹⁵ Both religion and education touch people deeply at similar points. That the one should partake of the expressive devices of the other is thus not a curiosity but a felicitous convenience.

I would now like to suggest how symbolization, as it has been presented here, might relate to the characteristics of the curriculum professoriat mentioned earlier. No full-dress interpretation is proposed, but I do think that regard for curriculum workers and other educators as the

bearers of symbols is a profitable undertaking and one which should be pursued in addition to instrumental analyses.

The tendency of curriculum professors and others in education to identify with the schools and to be acutely sensitive to external demands takes on new meaning when looked at symbolically. Rather than indicating vulnerability, in the sense in which Raymond Callahan understood the term,¹⁶ this tendency may be viewed as an indispensable structural feature of symbolic activity. For them to be effective, symbols must be close to the moment at hand and seen as relevant to that moment.

Similarly, although nondevelopment and redundancy may be lamentable traits of curriculum knowledge from a scholarly point of view, they are comprehensible from the standpoint of symbolization. The logic of emotional support is not linear. As Edelman points out, reassurance must be periodically renewed.¹⁷ The cues for what is said and done come from the psychological environment. This is in part why curriculum issues can be abandoned without intellectual resolution. What counts is whether their treatment has furthered emotional ends. From this vantage point, the amorphous state of the curriculum field and of the role specifications of its members is not particularly relevant. As long as curriculum workers convey symbols appropriately, their functional definition need not be a pressing concern. That the field has been able to survive for so long without the intellectual props which customarily give shape to academic areas lends credence to this proposition.

As for curriculum language, its frequently emotive character is of obvious symbolic importance. Such language alerts, challenges, inspires, or calms, depending upon the occasion. That it may be at times hollow

and imprecise -- that it may trade in terms like "whole child," "democratic living," "pupil needs," and "realizing one's potential," -- is no bar to psychological communication. In Edelman's opinion, this form of language is satisfying in that it reduces the need for careful thought and its oversimplifications lessen ambiguity.¹⁸ On the other hand, the careful definition of terms fragments symbols, thereby reducing their effective scope, and the introduction of new information can threaten to destroy established meanings which protect cherished beliefs.¹⁹ Symbolic discourse, therefore, is not intended to describe some "real" state of affairs but to express what people wish to believe, notwithstanding the facts and rational impediments.

One final point. Throughout this presentation I have assumed that the professoriat as a symbol bearer addresses an external audience made up of schoolteachers, administrators, other education officials, students, parents, politicians, and the generality of citizens. Sometimes the communication is direct; sometimes it is filtered among the groups, as when teachers pass along symbolic expressions generated elsewhere. But there is another audience which must be mentioned, and that is the professoriat itself. Professors spend a great deal of time talking to each other, and insofar as their discourse is symbolic, it serves the same purposes for them as it does for outsiders. And with good reason. Of course, everyone needs reassurance from time to time. But in the case of curriculum professors the need may be more pronounced because of the unclear state of their area as a university field and because of the uncertain territory between college and school which many of them inhabit. The exchange of symbols is a occupational support, a means of reassuring themselves that they are doing significant work,

and, importantly, a mechanism for enhancing personal and professional identity in their ill-defined pursuit.²⁰

Let me say, to end, that I am not so naive as to believe that I have offered a demonstrable answer to the question with which I began. That question allows for many responses and many interpretations. All I have attempted is to put forth what I believe to be a plausible way of looking at what the professoriat does. And if, perchance, symbolic shoes do indeed fit, I see no reason why we should be disinclined to wear them.

1. National Education Association, Deciding What To Teach, Washington, D.C., 1963, pp. 179-214.
2. Michael B. Katz, "From Theory to Survey in Graduate Schools of Education," Journal of Higher Education, Vol. 36, 1966, pp. 325-334.
3. Caleb Gattegno, "What the United States Can Teach the World in the Field of Education," paper delivered at a conference sponsored by the American Studies Association, Washington, D.C., 1976.
4. David K. Cohen and Bella H. Rosenberg, "Functions and Fantasies: Understanding Schools in Capitalist America," History of Education Quarterly, Vol. 17, No. 2, Summer 1977, pp. 113-137.
5. See Murray Edelman, The Symbolic Uses of Politics, Urbana, IL., University of Illinois Press, 1964, and Politics as Symbolic Action, Chicago, Markham Publishing Company, 1971.
6. Edelman, Symbolic Uses of Politics, p. 2.
7. The following comments on two types of symbols are informed by Edelman, Symbolic Uses of Politics; Ulf Himmeistrand, Social Pressures, Attitudes and Democratic Processes, Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksell, pp. 47, 263-269; and Susanne K. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 3rd edition, Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press, 1957, chs. 2-4.
8. Edelman, Symbolic Uses of Politics, p. 6.
9. Ibid., p. 7.
10. Ibid., p. 182.
11. George L. McHaffy, "Symbolic and Occupational Functions of Curriculum Discourse: An Exploration of Curriculum Theory During the Disciplines Era," typescript.
12. See, for example, the following titles, all published under the authorship of the Educational Policies Commission by the National Education Association, Washington, D.C.: The Unique Function of Education in American Democracy (1937), The Education of Free Men in American Democracy (1941) and Education for All American Youth (1944).
13. See, for example, National Society for the Study of Education, The Foundations and Technique of Curriculum-Making, 26th Yearbook of the NSSE, 2 parts, Bloomington, IL., Public School Publishing Company, 1926; Elliot W. Eisner, ed., Confronting Curriculum Reform, Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1971; and passim the yearbooks of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, especially those for 1951, 1952, 1963, and 1970.

14. Rush Welter, Popular Education and Democratic Thought in America, New York, Columbia University Press, 1962.
15. Cohen and Rosenberg refer to the point in their "Functions and Fantasies," p. 132.
16. Raymond Callahan, Education and the Cult of Efficiency, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1962.
17. Edelman, Symbolic Uses of Politics, p. 193.
18. Ibid., chs. 6-7.
19. Edelman, Politics as Symbolic Action, pp. 31-36.
20. Ibid., ch. 4.